

Chapter 3: Resuscitation

If a turtle appears to be comatose (unconscious), attempt to revive it before putting it back into the water. Use the following method of resuscitation (66 FR 67495, December 31, 2002):

Place the turtle on its plastron (lower shell) and elevate the hindquarters several inches to permit the lungs to drain off water (Figures 3-1 a and b).



Figure 3-1a. A comatose leatherback with the hindquarters elevated (NMFS/SEFSC photo).



Figure 3-1b. Elevate the hindquarters of a comatose turtle (Photo by E. Gilman, Blue Ocean Institute).

A living comatose sea turtle may, in some cases, exhibit absolutely no movement, muscle reflexes, or other signs of life. In other cases, an unconscious turtle may show some evidence of eyelid or tail movement when touched. Gently touch the eye and pinch the tail (reflex tests) periodically to see if there is a response. Sea turtles may take some time to revive; do not give up too quickly. Turtles captured during directed research activities should be transported as quickly as possible to a rehabilitation facility whenever feasible. Regulations allow a fisherman without a sea turtle handling permit to keep incidentally captured turtles on deck up to 24 hours for resuscitation purposes. Even turtles successfully resuscitated benefit from being held on deck as long as possible when conditions permit to allow stress toxins to dissipate from the body. Keep the skin (especially the eyes) moist while the turtle is on deck (Figure 3-2). Consider a turtle that has shown no sign of life after 24 hours on deck (kept moist and held in the shade) to be dead.

If an incidentally captured turtle cannot be revived before returning to shore and cannot be salvaged, it should be returned to the water, preferably in a non-fishing area. Mark the turtle (spray paint it or tag it) before returning it to the water.



Figure 3-2. Keep the turtle moist and in the shade, at the proper temperature (Photo by E. Gilman, Blue Ocean Institute).